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ABSTRACT

This study examined teachers' beliefs about how reading takes place and how reading processes develop. Subjects, 25 first-, fourth-, and sixth-grade teachers in five different Venezuelan schools, were administered protocols that consisted of a researcher/teacher conference, classroom observation, and an inventory designed to identify beliefs about how reading takes place and how reading processes develop. Results indicated that teachers were divided into three main groups: (1) two were whole language oriented; (2) three were eclectic oriented; and (3) 20 were "traditional" skill oriented teachers. A series of seminars and workshops was organized to discuss what the whole language approach could offer the teachers for an effective pedagogic practice. Upon completion of the seminars, the "traditional" teachers (and their students) demonstrated that they were comfortable about adopting aspects of the whole language approach in their teaching. (RS)

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The Empowering of Teachers with Whole Language Literacy Events: A Latin American Experience

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

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"Good Instructional Research synthesizes and explicates the curricular premises upon which it is conducted, tracks the collaborative learning that participants engage in as a function of the curriculum, and documents its values by demonstrating reflexivity in terms of original premises and curricular growth on the part of all participants...Educators must begin by not being afraid to acknowledge who they are". (Harste, 1988. p. 11)

In this investigation we examine teacher's beliefs about how reading takes place and how reading process develops. The research methodology consists of observation, and exchange of information with teachers participating in this study. Teacher observation was conducted in a real instructional setting. Once all information was collected and analyzed a teacher profile was obtained. This profile divides teachers into three main groups: two Whole Language oriented; three eclectic oriented and twenty skill oriented, also called "traditionals". Investigation was conducted in five different schools in Venezuela with twenty five volunteer teachers participating in this study. The teachers were working with first, fourth and six grades in the elementary schools using the new Venezuelan educational curriculum which is called "Escuela Básica" (Elementary School). We administered protocols consisting of 1) an inventory designed to identify beliefs about how reading takes place and how reading process develops, 2) note taking and classroom observation,

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and 3) researcher/teacher conferences. The main question in our study was: What is the theoretical framework that teachers use to organize their literacy events?. This main question was studied under two subquestions: a) What are the teacher's beliefs about how one reads and how reading process develops? and b) What are the instructional choices they make based on their theoretical orientation? The answer to these questions allowed us to suggest changes in order to improve literacy efficency among these school students.

There has not been much research done which identifies theories. Clark & Petersen (1986) stated that "research on teacher's implicit theories constitutes the smallest and most recent part of the literature on teacher thinking" (p.285) It is well known that teacher's beliefs are strongly affecting their teaching performance.

Since this was a three stage study, in the first stage we obtained a clear view of teacher's beliefs and attitudes about reading instruction. In the second stage researchers and teachers discussed by means of seminars and workshops once a week during two hours each session these presented Whole Language Approach as a new theory of literacy instruction. In the third stage discussion and acknowledgement of teacher's empowerment through Whole Language Approach was analyzed. We also discussed the educational implications of working as literacy facilitators while putting into practice Whole Language as an effective alternative in classroom literacy events and ways to improve efficiency. All three stages previously described will be analyzed in the following section of this work. Harste (1988) says that we do not need a new theory of reading, a new theory of writing, or a new theory of literature. What we need is a new theory of literacy instruction" (p.10).

TEACHERS' PROFILE.

From a theoretical point of view our informants can be grouped in three different profiles. Firstly, one group of two teachers was classified as Whole Language oriented, we decided to classify them only as "oriented" because they were not totally committed to whole language. True differentiation of these two teachers as whole languagers was difficult since it became apparent that there was merely a familiarity with the theory. Secondly, a group of three teachers were classified as eclectically oriented, and finally, a group of twenty teachers were considered "traditional" teachers.

Within the paradigms of our investigation, in order for teachers to be classified as Whole Language oriented they should evidence in daily practice the following tenets:

a) Language is seen as a whole and not as a sum of its component parts.

b) Function precedes form in using language.

c) Language users need to interrelate the processes of listening, speaking, reading, writing and viewing in the classroom in the same way as they do in their comunities.

d) Life experiences and language are inseperable in all learning situations. The learner's experiences induce language expansion and it is used to understand and react to new and different experiences in learning.

e) Language is used under real communication conditions to express ideas and feelings thus encouraging social and personal development.

f) Oral language thus facilitates in organizing environment, expressing experiences, and promoting real communication.

g) Written language is seen as a process and not as a product. Students use writing to form and to clarify thought, emotion and experience, sharing their ideas and adopting new postures toward one another.

h) The construction of meaning is the focus of reading. Parts interact with the whole unit. Reading is not an exact and precise process. Learning to read is like any other learning process. Error is seen as part of the experience in the construction of knowledge. Students and teachers are risk takers.

i) The teacher promotes the use of predictable books, magazines, newspapers, manuals, and any other relevant reading materials.

j) Evaluation is conducted keeping records of readings, essays, short narratives, poems, letters, and any other relevant activities by which students show their cognitive growth.

k) Observation and longitudinal sample of student's learning is the evaluation modality. It must always be born in mind that learning is process oriented, while a product is the result of finished knowledge.

The second group in our teacher profile was termed "traditional" and the main assumptions and instructional practices observed from these teachers were:

a) Language is learned by mastering skills.

b) Skills are learned in isolation.

c) Step-by-step progression is the best learning process.

d) Memorization. Syllables and words are memorized in isolation.

e) Accuracy when students sound out words. Linguistic hypercorrection.

f) Language analysis is prerequisite for reading comprehension.

g) Learning to read is from parts to whole.

i) Word recognition is necessary for comprehension.

j) Vocabulary is controlled. Oral drillinging in syllable and word.

K) Language is controlled by books. One "reading book" and dittos, xeroxcopies are the usual reading materials available.

l) Classroom environment is not provided with printed materials. The blackboard and a classroom board are the only resources available but the classroom board is full of dittos colored by children with no spontaneous student writing at all. The written portion of the lesson was a copy from grade textbooks, generally with reference to a national or cultural commemoration like, "flag day" "race day" "Bolivar's birthday" "The school's founder birthday" "carnival" "teachers' day" and so on.

m) Language is evaluated using quizes,comprehension questions, and grammar tests.

Finally, for our third profile in this study two teachers were considered as eclectical. While they were working in their classroom they showed more of the characteristics observed among "traditional" teachers than Whole Languagers, and a theoretical confusion was evident in their pedagogic practice.

THE WHOLE LANGUAGE APPROACH-SEMINARS AND WORKSHOPS.

Since most of our informants were classified as "traditionally oriented" we decided to organize our seminars and workshops in order to discuss what the Whole Language Approach could offer them for an effective pedagogic practice. We distributed to each of the teachers a copy of Goodman's 1989 book: "What's Whole in Whole Language", translated into Spanish as "El Lenguaje Integral" and Arellano-Osuna's, et al, 1989 book: "El Lenguaje Integral en la Escuela Básica" (Whole Language in Elementary School) both related to Whole Language approach from theory to practice.

Teachers were provided with the most appropriate theory instruction according to the rationale under consideration in this study. Our decision to use Whole Language was due in part to the excellent results that the practice of this approach has offered in countries such as, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, England, and The United States. In Venezuela this educational model has been implemented in some places among various research groups and experimentation from university and Ministry of Education research projects. Studies in this direction are well known in Latin America, although with different denominations. Piaget's work 1955, and 1969 and most recently Goodman, 1967, 1989; and Smith, 1971, have strongly influenced the work of authors like, Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky, 1979; Emilia Ferreiro, 1987 in Argentina and Mexico; Delia Lerner, Wallis de Gómez, Magally Pimentel et al, Special Education, Ministry of Education in Caracas-Venezuela; and GALE (written language adquisition group) in Mérida-Venezuela, since 1985. Finally, a strong movement using the Whole Language approach as a new educational form, and as a new way of viewing learning is being formed in Elementary Schools in Venezuela. A national teacher's group is already organized and working under this theoretical umbrella. Authors like Arellano-Osuna and Serrano de Moreno, 1989 have publications related to this theory and its benefits. There are some other groups in Venezuela, for example teachers in Táchira, Barquisimeto, and Coro (different state entities in Venezuela) are applying the Whole Language approach in their schools. Their research findings are still pending. Many teachers are actively working to promote positive changes in the Venezuelan educational system.

Theoretical Rationale.

The Whole Language approach stands on a foundation of four humanistic scientific pillars. It has a strong theory of learning, a theory of language, a basic view of teaching and the role of teachers, curriulum

centered around language. (Goodman, 1986). Whole language rejects misconceptions that are common in education such as the assumption that individuals learn differently so therefore must be subjected to different methods. It is true that individuals learn differently but it does not follow that we have to match the method to the learning style of individuals. Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1982 stated that a method may help or hinder, facilitate or complicate, but not cause people to learn by itself, there must be other motivations.

Whole Language theory supports the idea that we need to provide a generous socially structured environment so that individuals can learn selectively. We give them the opportunity to choose what best fits their learning needs, and then if learning does not occur, it is necessary that teachers deliberately guide them. Knowledge is not obtained in a linear way. Learners do not need a step-by-step-road or to go on adding parts of knowledge in sequential order so that they can reach a given goal. Instead a learner constructs his/her bases for understanding as part of his/her total activity. In this conception error is seen as a constructive and necessary prerequisite to find the correct solution. Therefore, the learner need not fear error or forgetting. One important thing is the capacity of individuals to recover forgotten knowledge. Students often depend on teachers since they consider that teachers as professionals possess, knowledge and this may be true, but at the same time, learners can be dependent in understanding the mechanisms that produce knowledge and become creators of knowledge.

On the other hand, the traditional or behaviorist view of learning supports the idea that learners are recipient (students) or producers (teachers) of knowledge. People who think in this way are opposed to the Piagetian view of learning. This author's theory states that the "cognitive

conflict" is what permits attained knowledge or may be used to go on building knowledge. Piaget's psychogenetic theory and the developments in contemporary psycholinguistics open new paths for understanding the processes of learning.

Low Venezuelan Elementary School Achievements.

It is our hope that with the above discussed ideas in mind teachers in Latin America can find solutions to the problem of teaching written language in school to diminish the high porcentages of student drop outs, desertion or exclusion from the school systems in our countries. There was a high percentage of drop outs in 1989, reaching a percentage of 48% according to the statistics from the Ministry of Education in Venezuela. The causes that increase the percentage from 33% in 1988 can be analyzed from many different perspectives; but it is not within the scope of this study to go over all of them. However, it was necessary to analyze what was considered to be the two determinant factors: the teachers' role in teaching/learning efficiency and how their pedagogic practice influences the learning process.

Findings from Classroom Observation and Questionnaire Responses.

As we learn from our observation in classrooms and by the answers teachers produced in the written questionnares administered to them for determining their beliefs, there is no doubt that their conception of teaching/learning process are far away from what is considered promising in any educational process. It is our hope that in studying and discussing the Whole Language approach as a more effective educational alternative, the students' attained goals could be incremented, and at the same time an undersanding will allow them to perform better once they put this theory into practice. They need to bring about the positive

changes in the near future in their classrooms. Overall we were interested in seeing teachers becoming a collaraborative team rather than a group of individuals each pursuing their own method.

Teacher-Researcher Collaborative Work.

In our discussion sessions teachers were willing to exchange ideas and to organize, plan and design their teaching/learning activities. They discussed ideas about implementing the **State Educational Curriculum** in an integrated way as is required if Whole Language is to be applied in the true dimension of the theory. Fortunately, teachers found no difficulty in acquainting themselves with the theory since many seminar hours were devoted to its discussion. Teachers in the first three grades of Elementary School, which is the first stage, found the process of curricular integration very easy and rewarding. This type of response was not observed at the higher level of primary school at the beginning of our work sessions. All these difficulties emerge since in the **State Educational Curriculum** the educational areas are divided by subject matter, and different teachers, one for each area, are responsible for conducting the lesson in each subject matter. This kind of arbitrary division by knowledge area renders a more thorough understanding of the demands of true curricular integration. For example, in sixth grade, teachers decided to organize a plan of activities flexible enough to be shared with teachers of other areas during an hour which is devoted to collaborative teaching. In this way there is a better general uderstanding of Whole Language concepts.

Teacher reaction to changes recommended by researchers was favorable throughout the whole group of participants. As they started applying this approach the improved physical organization of every classroom became evident. Moreover, from a rigid and authoritarian teacher behaviour children experienced a collaborative, enthusiastic

teacher, ready to listen to all they wanted to express during the learning process. There was an increased exchange of information between children and teachers as the children's experiences were taken into account to orchestrate classroom learning activity.

Reading Resources Supplier.

Since most teachers complain of the lack of meaningful, interesting reading material to use in their classroom, books were brought from the public library. The public library has a program to promote the use of books in schools, called "the traveling box" which transports books from one classroom to another. "The traveling box" was the name given to a box containing a variety of children's literature books, classified and recommended by reader interest by the librarians. Besides this, teachers and children brought to their classrooms all books which they considered important to be read in class. In this way the lack of good reading material was overcome.

When the School Librarian Was Incorporated to the Project.

One of the important advances of our project was this librarian participation, making the librarian, "a member of the club" as Smith (1971) put it in his treatise on Understanding Reading. The librarian was ready to provide assistance for children and teachers whenever they needed it. He developed an interesting program to promote reading in school. He decided to xerox copy the front page of all the new books that enter the school library collection and at the same time include a brief summary of the most relevant aspects of each book content. These xeroxes were distributed among students in each classroom. He visited each classroom, promoting books, reading to students what they considered important from each book index advertised. Teachers also participated in this activity and the results were very positive since most children return later to the

school library to borrow books and take them home. He also developed in the school library another important activity which consisted in keeping a library mail. Readers could write anything they considered important to share with other readers about books, magazines, newspapers or any other material they had experienced as readers. Shoe boxes were placed on a front shelf where even small children were able to reach them to deposit their mail. The librarian read the mail every week and most of the children's expressed ideas were taken into account, firstly to give better service to the patrons of the library, and secondly to obtain more samples of those books that children considered interesting in order to have them available for future readers.

Moving Toward Whole Language Classrooms and Teachers.

In this portion of the presentation examples taken from traditional and whole language classrooms will be presented as part of an analysis of our conceptions about the teaching/learning process. It is hoped that the observation in the classroom of two opposite teacher behaviours, their materials and their methods of evaluation will allow us to decide what changes may be implemented in our educational practices.

The "Traditional" classrooms of the Past.

Description of activities conducted in a "traditional" classroom as observed in this study:

In first grade the teacher said to the children: "open your books to page ten, each of you will read silently and then you will read aloud". Later, two children were asked to sound out the syllables shown in the reading book. Later, the teacher said: "Well, now we are going to copy from the blackboard the curriculum objective". Then, she asked: "have you all copied the objective?". When the students answered: "yes", she asked a child to copy the four elements, earth, air, fire, water on the blackboard.

A little before she had asked a boy that was in front of the blackboard: "Do you remember?" the student answered: "yes". When the child had finished his written exercise on the blackboard, she said: "Look, you have made a mistake my little boy", she wrote the word "earth" on the blackboard again and said to the student: "would you like me to write like this.....?" She was sarcastically demonstrating in small and big letters that the word as written by the student was wrong assuming that when he had seen it written by the teacher he would recognize his mistake. Then she said: "I think you need more practice in handwriting". A little later she asked the children: "let's see, do you remember the day when we discussed differences?". "Who is bigger or smaller?". She asked two students to stand up in front of the class to exemplify comparisons between sizes and then she sent another student to the blackboard and asked him to draw the earth. Once the student finished his diagram she said: "sit down and draw it in your notebook". Finally the teacher said: "now we are going to copy tomorrow's homework". In this classroom most of the reading activities were limited to what the teacher ordered copied or read. Authoritarianism was the common denominator and teacher centered learning was predominant. There was no integration of student thought at all. By the teacher's performance and in the way she conducted most activities the learning processes among students was seen to be divorced from reality. The curriculum was divided into small learning bits, adding one piece of knowledge at a time and emphasizing errors as though they were bad habits, as seen from behaviorist point of view. This sort of activity is typical of that observed when we first contact and record what is happening in the classrooms of collaborating teachers.

Teachers in fourth and sixth grades spent a lot of time dictating or copying curriculum objectives on the blackboards. Only one reading book was used for most reading activities. Students were asked to copy and repeat what was written on the blackboard. Much of the time students

were answering open ended questions included with the text. In writing things were not much different, most teachers walk around the classroom correcting misspellings and giving recommendations on how to improve their handwriting. Of course, calligraphy was the panacea. In this paradigm good handwriting implies optimum learning. The only reading-writing opportunities students experienced were teacher-centered, mechanical exercises.

Changes Shown in Pedagogic Practices

After working with "traditional" teachers in learning about what the Whole Language Approach offered them in implementing the teaching/learning processes, we observed the following changes. Teachers were confortable about deviating from the adopted curriculum materials. They put themselve at risk when changing the curriculum even the old one did not meet student needs, interests or life experience. In the new paradigm personal values were shared and evaluated as having true worth. Teachers spent much of the time finding ways to match student interests to the objective of the lesson. Students enjoyed selecting their own books. Teachers formulate questions about the text having in mind the best strategies readers need to understand or to reconstruct meaning. Prior knowledge is considered important and questions about what students knew about the topic before reading were asked using brain storming techniques. One of the strategies is to allow children to formulate good questions after reading, with the teacher modeling. After, teachers ask a variety of questions moving from literal to inferential types of questions. Students take a turn posing questions to each other or the teacher. Another strategy commonly used was to allow students to explore and discover the variety of relationships existing between a question-text-and the reader's knowledge. It was our belief that if students were able to generate good questions, a comprehension process

was attained successfully. To assist students in making connections between concepts and related ideas, semantic mapping was used.

Finally students were encouraged to write letters and to develop classroom mail boxes. Mail boxes were placed on each student desk. Any message they wanted to transmit to teachers or classmates was delivered and every morning students had half an hour to answer their mail. At the end of each day session students wrote their letters although they were free to write at any moment when they felt like it. This kind of writing also helps students to have written material available whenever they want for discussion or to exhibit on the school boards. In this way students develop a real sense of audience. Learning writing by writing was not difficult because it thus had a purpose. Cooperative learning strategies were also incorporated in these classrooms.

At the beginning it was difficult for students to understand that cooperation is not copying from somedoby else and that they were able and free to ask other students to look over their work to help them when they were confused or unsure of a particular task. Social interaction was understood as part of reading, writing, and sharing what you read or write with others.

The Empowering of Teachers Via Whole Language.

All the above discussed experiences applying Whole Language in environments that used to be "traditional" was quite a challenge. The positive results observed among teachers and students in the accomplishment of their educational goals by means of these educational changes has proven to be worthwhile from every aspect. We plan to continue working with these teachers, giving them assistance and support in their everyday practice since there are many educational situations that need to be studied and analyzed before overall change can be attained. We cannot expect definitive results in the space of one school

year. It is our hope that the findings in this study will assist teachers that want to have better results from their everyday practice in their classrooms in Venezuela and the rest of Latin America. Teachers need to recover the power lost. We have offered them a true humanistic alternative to which they, as risk takers, can adhere in their lives as professional teachers.

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